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**January 12, 2020 Morning Call News Article**

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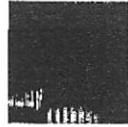
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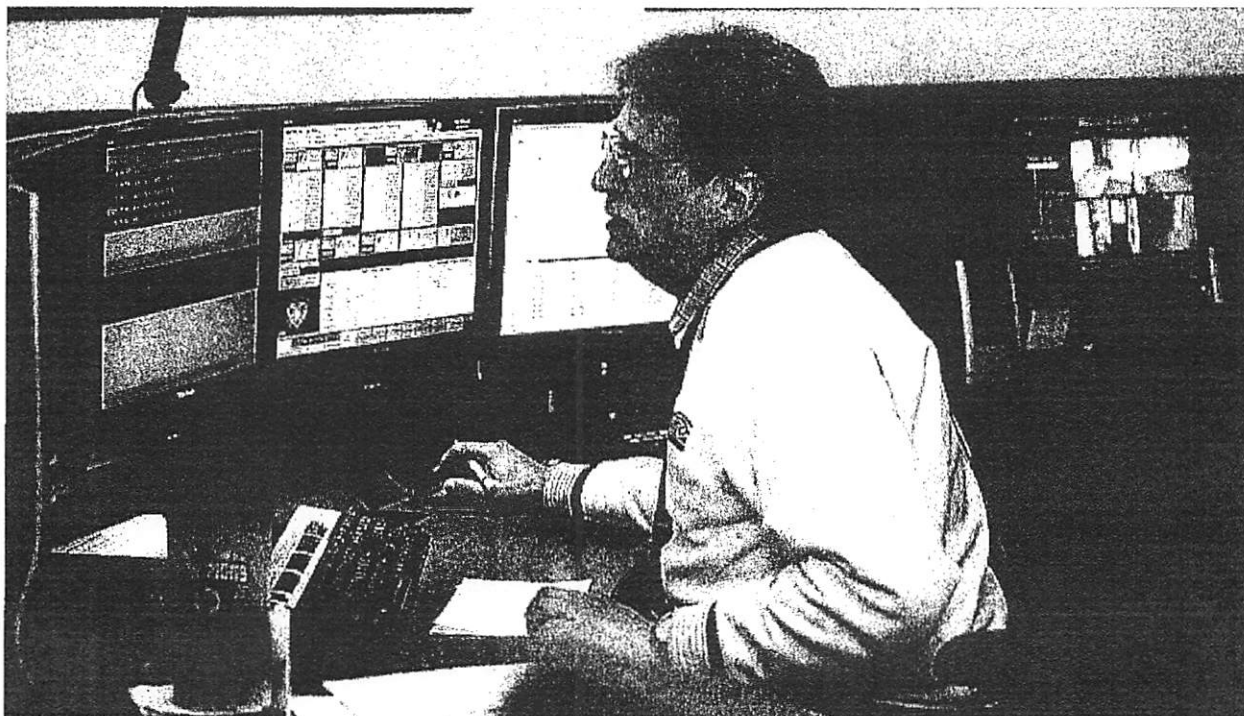
WATCHDOG NEWS

# Lehigh County 911 calls taking longer to dispatch since merger of Allentown, county centers

FEEDBACK

By EMILY OPILO and EUGENE TAUBER  
THE MORNING CALL | JAN 12, 2020





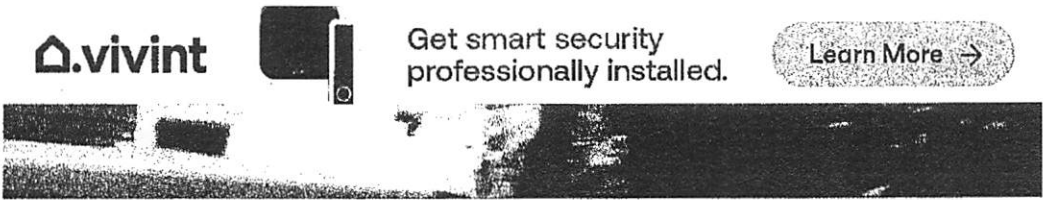
Dispatcher Scott Raubenhold handles a call in the Lehigh County 911 Communications Center on Hamilton Street in Allentown. (Morning Call file photo)

In an emergency, every second counts, and in Lehigh County, those seconds have been mounting.

**FEEDBACK**

Dispatch times — when a 911 call is received to when the first crew is dispatched — have grown by an average of two minutes since the June merger of the Lehigh County and Allentown 911 operations, according to data analyzed by The Morning Call.

ADVERTISING

The Vivint logo, featuring a stylized house icon followed by the word "vivint" in a lowercase, sans-serif font.An advertisement for Vivint smart security. It features the Vivint logo, a small image of a security camera, and the text "Get smart security professionally installed." To the right is a "Learn More" button with a right-pointing arrow. Below this is a large, dark, grainy image, possibly of a night-vision camera feed.

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Between June 18, the date of the transition, and Oct. 28, when The Morning Call filed its Right-to-Know request, calls took an average of 5.5 minutes to dispatch, the data show. From January 2017 until June, the average was 3.5 minutes.

FEEDBACK

That's "definitely cause for concern," said Jeremy Warmkessel, head of Allentown's firefighters union, who said he has observed a lag but had yet to formally crunch the numbers. "If there's a two-minute longer dispatch, it's a huge difference in an actual fire."

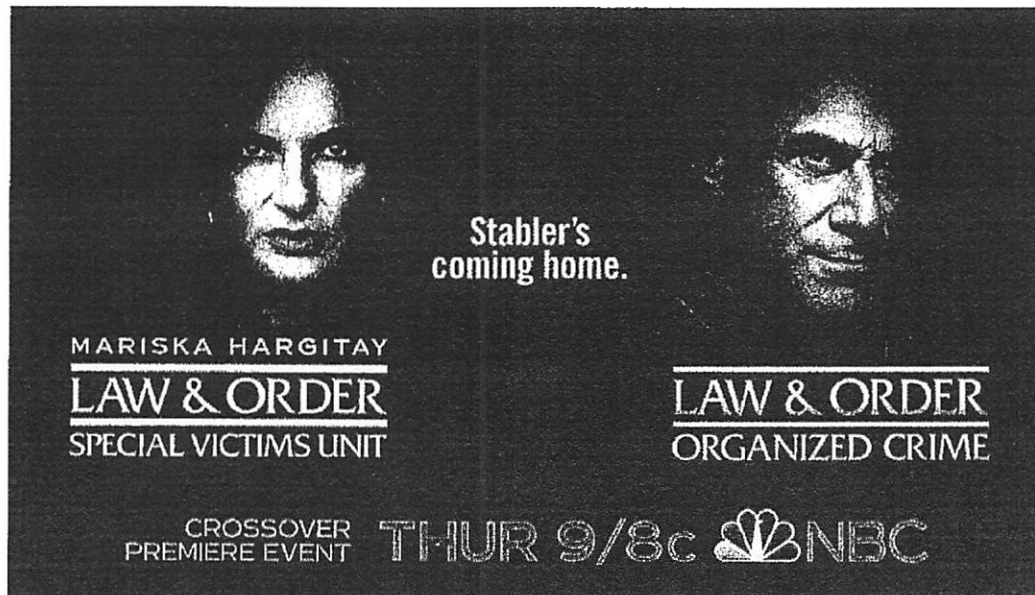
The consolidation of Lehigh County and Allentown's 911 systems, which had been in the works for more than a year, **began with a mandate from state**, not local, officials. A 2015 funding bill for 911 centers across the state set a June 2019 sunset date for funding to Allentown and Bethlehem's 911 centers, the last two city-run centers in the state.

State officials argued at the time that regionalization of the 911 centers would reduce costs and increase efficiency. Allentown's 911 operation was absorbed by



Lehigh County, while the center in Bethlehem, which sits in both counties, merged with Northampton County.

ADVERTISING



The state set a July 1 deadline for the mergers. Lehigh County took control of Allentown's operation in January, but did not move its employees to the county facility until June 18. At that point, all employees began using a new computer system to dispatch calls.

FEEDBACK

Rick Molchany, director of general services for Lehigh County, acknowledged issues with the consolidation but said it has been a success overall.

"I believe we're within standards, but I believe the opportunities are there for us to get better and faster," he said.

The Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency requires 911 calls to be answered within 10 seconds, but does not mandate how quickly a call must be dispatched. Lehigh County has an internal goal to dispatch all calls in a "timely manner," Molchany said — three minutes for most calls and five minutes for less critical ones.

Industry standards, set by the National Fire Protection Association, call for high priority emergencies to be dispatched within 60 seconds. Those include trauma

calls such as a gunshot wound, neurological emergencies, cardiac issues, unconscious or unresponsive patients, allergic reactions, choking and instances of a person not breathing. Fires and explosions are also high priority calls.

The 60-second standard is rarely met locally or at dispatch centers across the country, local emergency officials conceded. But even a few minutes of lag in dispatch time can have dire consequences. In October, the **fire that swept through 10 homes on Fountain Street in Allentown** was dispatched in just under three minutes from the time the first 911 call was received at 3:08 a.m. A video shows flames rapidly spreading and people banging on doors to alert neighbors, but no sirens can be heard from Central Fire Station, which is half a mile away.

FEEDBACK

(Warning: language) Residents frantically try to wake neighbors after a house fire at 726 N. Fountain St. in Allentown before it spread. Video by Syd McKenzie



Molchany said he was surprised by the spike in dispatch times. County officials have yet to identify one key issue driving the increase, but numerous factors are likely at play, he said.

The new equipment required training and a “learning curve,” Molchany said.

New employees require 160 hours of training before they can sit on the call floor. The county 911 center is budgeted for 62 operators, and about 15 positions were vacant at the time of the merger. That has since been reduced to eight, Molchany said.

Average dispatch time also may be lagging because two different protocols are in place. Allentown police calls are still dispatched as they were when the city operated its own 911 center, Molchany said, with less urgent calls such as noise or nuisance violations placed in a queue and not marked as dispatched until handled by an officer. Under that system, dispatch times for a parking or noise complaint might be more than 12 minutes, as Allentown data has shown.

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FEEDBACK

But when such calls come for departments outside the city, they are marked as dispatched as soon as they are relayed, though officers might not address the issue until much later.

Molchany said that eventually one countywide protocol will be developed.

But the elevated averages can't be completely attributed to that technicality. There also have been complaints about the inflexibility of the new computer system, which requires certain fields to be filled in before a call can be dispatched. In the past, Allentown dispatchers had the ability to override such requirements in their



own system, immediately sending a firetruck or ambulance to a call before they completed the forms and formally dispatched the call.

Overrides are not possible with the new system, Molchany acknowledged. The issue likely will be addressed when the countywide protocol is established, he said.

"We continue to improve, and I would judge our conversion and consolidation as a success with the opportunity to maybe even get better and provide better service," he said.

Eric Gratz, chief of operations for Allentown EMS, said quick dispatch times are critical, particularly for heart attacks or strokes. Additional minutes can mean irreparable damage to the heart or permanent loss of brain cells.

"The chain starts with our 911 center, where dispatchers give instructions to callers for performing CPR and other interventions," he said. "Obviously, we want this process to be as expedient and efficient as possible to ensure that help arrives quickly."

**FEEDBACK**

Allentown Mayor Ray O'Connell did not return messages seeking comment.

Allentown City Council President Daryl Hendricks said that while he has not heard any complaints from residents or first responders about 911 dispatch times, a lag would concern him. It seems reasonable, he added, that times would slow down at least for a while after the merger.

"I would think there's going to be some flies in the ointment," he said. "The change that came about was quite significant."

Any lag time naturally should decrease over the next year, Hendricks said, or the city and county will have to make sure it does.

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